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Master of His Game

Author Sidney Sheldon,
Hammering Out the Hits

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Three words about Sidney Sheldon's new book were all CBS Television needed to hand over \$1 million for the mini-series rights.

The three words were "female con artist." The book is "If Tomorrow Comes," currently topping The New York Times and The Washington Post best-seller lists.

"I wouldn't let CBS see the book itself until it was published," said Sheldon. Then, in the middle of a weekly executive meeting, "the door opened and in walked four tuxedoed men with violins playing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' followed by two girls in evening dresses bearing silver trays with copies of my manuscript on it, and behind them girls strewing rosebuds.

"My agent said he figured CBS deserved some fanfare for their million."

In his checked sports coat, sincere tie, white hair and black-rimmed glasses, Sheldon, at 67, is the very image of a best-selling California author in a sitcom. Look twice to be convinced that he isn't being played by Cary Grant, one of his best friends. In town recently to interview former

CIA chief Richard Helms, as well as several ambassadors, senators and foreign service types, all for his next book, he talked over a cup of coffee in his posh Regent Hotel suite.

"I don't send my books to the publisher's office," said Sheldon, whose devious mind has brought him millions. "Many publishing houses have spies who mimeograph manuscripts. They make a deal with studios, because the studios are eager to see those manuscripts first if it's a hot author." Rather, his publisher, William Morrow head Larry Hughes, flies out with his editor to Sheldon's house in Holmby Hills, Calif., or to the rented castle in Italy or the flat in London. The house guests are sequestered until they finish reading the book and make an offer.

Sheldon hasn't always been so hard to get. In 1970 he finished his first novel, "The Naked Face," and asked author Irving Wallace for the name of an agent. "Hill Black, the agent, would call me and say, 'Well, Knopf turned it down. Simon and Schuster turned it down.' . . . Finally, after 10 turndowns, he sold it to Morrow. Morrow paid me \$1,000. They didn't know I would have paid them.